DOCKET NO: 175-0002US

APPLICATION

FOR

UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT

TITLE: Multiple Degrees of Freedom Connectors and Adapters

INVENTOR: Tavis D. Schriefer

Express Mail No: EV195559736US
Date: July 11, 2003

Prepared by: WONG, CABELLO, LUTSCH, RUTHERFORD & BRUCCULERI, L.L.P.
HOUSTON, TEXAS
(VOICE) 832-446-2400 (FACSIMILE) 832-446-2424

MULTIPLE DEGREES OF FREEDOM CONNECTORS AND ADAPTERS

Cross-Reference To Related Applications

[0001] The present patent application claims the benefit of a U.S. provisional patent applications entitled "Electrical or Optical Connector Adapter with Rotational Mechanisms," Serial Nos. 60/400,792 (filed on 2 August 2002), 60/416,569 (filed on 7 October 2002) and 60/438,467 (filed on 7 January 2003) by the same inventor.

Background

[0002] The invention relates generally to connectors and adapters and more particularly, but not by way of limitation, to connectors and adapters that provide multiple degrees of freedom of motion for coupling electronic components.

[0003] A large variety of electronic (including electro-optical) devices are currently available on the market. Many of these devices need to be interconnected to other devices to be more useful or desirable. For example, a user may want to connect their notebook computer to an external memory device, a digital camera, MP3 player or a modem. To interconnect these various devices users have traditionally needed a variety of different connectors and/or adaptors. When in use, these connectors and adaptors extend from the hosting device making it difficult or impossible to place the hosting device and/or the connected peripheral device in a desired position. In addition, connectors that

extend from a housing (host or peripheral) are prone to breakage, bad connections or damage to the connected device or the hosting device itself. In a desktop environment, these problems may be tolerable in so far as the host device and the connector/adapter may be placed in a location out of harms way. In a mobile environment however (e.g., a notebook or handheld computer, a cellular telephone and a digital camcorder), the use of connectors and/or adaptors that extend from the base unit's body are particularly troublesome.

[0004] These problems are particularly problematic for the newest types of small devices designed to be directly interfaced to host devices. Illustrative small devices include, but are not limited to, card readers, BlueTooth, networking and biometric devices. Many of these small devices have connector heads attached directly to the bodies of the devices. In some cases the small device cannot be successfully interfaced to a host device due to the physical conflicts between the housing of the host device and the small device. For example, the orientation of a connector head on a notebook computer may not match the orientation of the connector head on a memory card device. Another common problem is that the host device connector head/socket is oriented in such a manner that the peripheral device (e.g., a card reader) cannot be plugged into the host without creating physically conflicts with other devices or infrastructure (e.g., a wall or seat).

[0005] Some prior art devices provide connectors that allow one degree of freedom of motion – motion that may partially reduce the aforementioned

problems. Some prior art devices, for example, are able to bend, i.e. rotate along an axis that is perpendicular to the direction that one connector head is inserted into another connector head to make a connection. These connectors allow a hosting device and a peripheral device to be joined in places or situations where fixed connectors would not. Other prior art connectors may allow peripheral device connector head to rotate or spin such that a host and a peripheral device may be connected even if the connector head on the peripheral device has a different horizontal or vertical orientation from that of the host device. All these devices, however, continue to extend the coupled device in a predetermined orientation away from the hosting device.

[0006] Thus, it would be beneficial to provide a mechanism that would allow one or more devices to be coupled through an arbitrary and fixable orientation and which allow devices to be coupled in a low-profile manner. Such a mechanism would overcome physical connection constraints present in current connectors and adaptors.

Summary

[0007] In one embodiment, the invention provides a connector having multiple degrees of freedom of movement. The connector comprises a first connector head having an axis, a second connector head and a connection mechanism coupling the first and second connector heads, wherein the connection mechanism is adapted to limit the motion of the second connector

head (relative to the first connector head) in a first plane substantially coincident with the axis and in a second plane substantially orthogonal to the axis. The connector may further comprise additional connector heads, an electronic device and/or an additional connection mechanism to permit rotation of the second connector head and/or electronic device about the axis. In some embodiments the additional connector heads or electronic device may move independent of one another while, in other embodiments, they move coincident with one another. In still other embodiments, connectors in accordance with the invention may be incorporated within electronic devices. In yet other embodiments, the second connector head may be at a fixed angle relative to the first connector head.

[0008] Connectors in accordance with some embodiments of the invention provide connector heads that may be fixedly set in a user-preferred position – a position that changes only on affirmative action by a user. Connectors in accordance with the invention may implement any desired connector head. Illustrative connector head types include, but are not limited to, Universal Serial Bus (USB), FireWire, video monitor and serial connector heads. Further, connectors in accordance with the invention may employ different connector head styles (e.g., USB and serial connector heads) within a single connector apparatus. Connectors in accordance with the invention may be embodied in electrical or electro-optical connectors and may further be incorporated within devices such as, for example, memory devices (e.g., flash memory disk,

magnetic disk drive and optical disk drive peripherals), card readers (e.g., secure data and multimedia cards) and communication devices (e.g., wireless modem and standard modem peripherals).

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0009] Figures 1A through 1C illustrate a right-handed coordinate system.

[0010] Figures 2A and 2B show a connector in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

[0011] Figure 3A shows an electronic device coupled to a host device via a prior art connector, while FIG. 3B shows the electronic device coupled to the host device via a connector in accordance with FIGS. 2A and 2B.

[0012] Figure 4 illustrates an embodiment of the invention wherein one connector head is integral to an electronic device.

[0013] Figures 5A and 5B show a connector in accordance with another embodiment of the invention.

[0014] Figures 6A and 6B show yet a connector in accordance with yet another embodiment of the invention.

[0015] Figures 7A and 7B show a connector assembly in accordance with the invention that incorporates an electronic device.

[0016] Figures 8A and 8B show a connector in accordance with still another embodiment of the invention.

[0017] Figures 9, 10, 11 and 12 show connectors in accordance with additional embodiments of the invention.

[0018] Figures 13A and 10B show a connector in accordance with the invention incorporated within a host device.

Detailed Description

[0019] The invention relates generally to connectors and adaptors and more particularly, but not by way of limitation, to mechanisms that provide two or more degrees of freedom for coupling two or more devices in an arbitrary and fixable orientation. The following embodiments of the invention, described in terms of Universal Serial Bus (USB) connectors and adaptors, are illustrative only and are not to be considered limiting in any respect. To facilitate the following discussion, the standard right-hand coordinate system shown in FIG. 1A through 1C is hereby adopted.

[0020] In one embodiment of the invention, two-degree of freedom USB connector **200** allows motion in both the Y-Z plane (side view, FIG. 2A) and the X-Z plane (top view 2B). In this embodiment, connector **200** has male connector head **205** and female connector head **210**. Between connector heads **205** and **210** are two connection mechanisms **215** and **220**. Mechanism **215** allows connector head **210** to rotate in the Y-Z plane, while mechanism **220** allows connector head **210** to rotate in the X-Z plane. As illustrated in FIG. 2A, rotational mechanism **215** has an approximately ±90° range of motion relative

to the long axis of connector head **205**. As illustrated in FIG. 2B, rotational mechanism **220** allows rotation of connector **210** in the X-Z plane of up to approximately 120° (clockwise or counterclockwise). In use, connector **200** may be used to couple a hosting device (e.g., a notebook computer) via connector head **205** to a peripheral device (e.g., a portable USB device) via connector head **210**. In accordance with connector **200**, the peripheral device may be folded and/or rotated in close proximity to the hosting device. While connector heads **205** and **210** are illustrated as being standard USB connector heads, this is not required. For example, connector heads **205** and **210** could be a mini-USB connector heads. In addition, connector heads **205** and **210** could be different "style" connector heads. For example, connector head **205** could be a standard USB connector head while connector head **210** could be a Serial connector head, a mini-USB, etc.

[0021] In another embodiment, one or both of mechanisms **215** and **220** provide a fixedly adjustable positioning mechanism. That is, either or both of mechanisms **215** and **220** may be designed to retain a user-specified position and to hold that position until affirmatively altered. In these embodiments, an applied external force is required to place mechanisms **215** and **220** in a first position, wherein the weight of the connector heads and/or stand-alone device would not generally be sufficient to rotate either mechanism **215** or **220**. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize there are many means to implement this feature. For example, a hinge for rotation and friction for holding a connector in

place is one means. Another means may use two mating planar surfaces to keep the rotation motion along a predetermined track or path and also increase the surface area for more stationary friction when a desirable position is reached. A third means could use a ball and socket universal joint similar in function to those used in conventional shower-heads.

[0022] Figure 3A illustrates the use of prior art USB connector **300** to couple memory device **305** to host computer **310**. As shown, memory device **305** extends a significant distance out from host computer **310**. As a result, host computer **310** must be placed further away from external obstacles than may be desired or possible and is subject to breakage as indicated above. In contrast, when memory device **305** is coupled to host computer **310** through connector **200**, memory device **305** may be rotated in both the Y-Z (via mechanism **215**) and X-Z (via mechanism **220**) planes to conveniently place memory device **305** (or any peripheral) in close proximity to host computer **310**.

[0023] In accordance with another embodiment of the invention, connector head **210** may be fixedly coupled or integral to a functional unit such as, for example, an electronic device. Illustrative electronic devices include, but are not limited to, card readers, memory devices and wireless network devices. Figures 4A and 4B, for example, illustrate an embodiment in which connector **400** comprises a standard USB connector head **205** while the second connector head (e.g., connector head **210** of FIG. 2) is integral to electronic device **405**. By way

of example, and as noted above, electronic device **405** could be a card reader, memory device or wireless network device.

[0024] In yet another embodiment (see FIGS. 5A and 5B), USB connector **500** provides mechanism **505** for rotational motion in the Y-Z plane in a manner as illustrated in FIG. 2A (mechanism **215**) and mechanism **510** for rotation of connector head **515** about the Z axis. In the illustrated embodiment, mechanism **510** provides approximately **359°** of rotation about the Z axis.

[0025] In still another embodiment, mechanism **510** may be incorporated into connector **200** to provide three degrees of motion. As shown in FIGS. 6A and 6B, connector **600** permits connector heads **605** and **610** to be rotated about the Z-axis via mechanism **615**, rotated in the Y-Z plane via mechanism **620** and rotated in the X-Z plane via mechanism **625**. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize and appreciate that connector **600** could be incorporated into an electronic device in a manner described above with respect to connector **200** (see FIG. 4).

[0026] In one embodiment of the invention, the fixed device capability of FIG. 4 may be combined with the connector of FIGS. 2, 5 or 6 to provide an apparatus having a device (e.g., a fixed memory device or a card reader) and a second connector head. Referring now to FIG. 7, connector **700** provides connectivity through host connector head **705** to both device **710** and second connector head **715**. In the illustrated embodiment, device **710** and connector head **715** may move independent of one another via mechanism **725**. In

another embodiment, however, device **710** and connector head **715** may be mechanically coupled so that they move coincident with one another – that is, together. For convenience, FIG. 7 illustrates the functional combination of FIGS. 2 and 4 only. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that mechanism **510** (see FIG. 5) may also be incorporated into connector **700** to provide an additional degree motion.

[0027] Referring to FIG. 8, in yet another embodiment of the invention connector **800** allows a plurality of devices to be coupled to a single host system in a "hub" configuration. A side view of connector **800** is shown in FIG. 8A. A top view of connector **800** is shown in FIG. 8B. As shown, male connector head **805** may couple directly to a host system (e.g., a notebook or desk-top computer system) while female connector heads **810** and **815** may be coupled to peripheral devices. (One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that connector heads **810** and **815** do not need to be female. One of **810** and **815** may be male and the other may be female.) Similar to mechanism **215** in FIG. 2, mechanism **820** provides rotation in the Y-Z plane. Similar to mechanism **220**, mechanism **825** provides rotation in the X-Z plane for each of connector heads **810** and **815** independently of one another. In one embodiment, connector **800** acts as a USB hub with the necessary circuitry to implement the hub function enclosed within, for example, mechanism **825**. Embodiments in accordance with connector **800**, allow a single device to provide connectivity to two peripherals, both of which may be retained in close proximity to the host device without

interference with the host device, one another or a component in the external environment. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that connector **800** could also incorporate mechanism **510** of FIG. 5 to provide a mechanism permitting three degrees of motion.

[0028] Additional embodiments of a connector/adapter in accordance with the invention are shown in FIGS. 9 through 12. In FIG. 9, connector **900** comprises male connector head **905** that is fixedly oriented at 90° to female connector head **910**, where connector mechanism **915** provides rotation of connector head **910** in the X-Z plane. It will be recognized that connector **900** may also provide multiple connector capability similar to that illustrated in FIG. 8, albeit in a plane orthogonal to the plane of connector head **905**. FIGS. 10A and 10B illustrate two embodiments in which rotational control of one or more connector heads in all planes is achieved by use of a goose-neck or flexible jointed pipe **1000**. Figure 11 illustrates a connector similar to that shown in FIG. 2, except that one end of connector **1100** is coupled to cable **1105** rather than another connector head. Similarly, FIG. 12 illustrates a connector similar to that shown in FIG. 5, except that one end of connector **1200** is coupled to cable **1205** rather than another connector head. It will be recognized that cable **1105** and **1205** may have at their distal end (not shown) a connector head. It will further be recognized that connectors **900** and **1100** could incorporate mechanism **510** (see FIG. 5) to provide an additional degree of motion.

[0029] Referring to FIGS. 13A and 10B, rotational-only embodiments **1000** and **1005** of the invention may be built directly into host device **1010** and **1015** respectively. In accordance with these embodiments, rotational elements **1000** and **1005** permit rotation up to approximately **359°** so that whatever the orientation of the connector on a peripheral device may happen to be, the connector on the hosting device can be rotated to accommodate the need of the peripheral device.

[0030] Various changes in the disclosed embodiments are possible without departing from the scope of the claims. For instance, while the embodiments of FIGS. 2 through 10 have been shown in terms of a USB-type connector, the invention is not so limited. Any connectors used to make electrical or electro-optical data connections can benefit from the invention. For example, Universal Serial Bus (as defined, for example, in the USB 2.0 specification), FireWire (as defined in the I.E.E.E. 1394 standard), BlueTooth (as defined in the BlueTooth specification and published by the BlueTooth Special Interest Group), video monitor, RS232 and fiber optic connectors are all within the scope of the invention and the claims below. Peripheral devices that may benefit from an adjustable connector in accordance with the invention include, but are not limited to, data storage devices, card readers (e.g., Secure Data and Multimedia Card readers) BlueTooth or other communication devices, security devices, lights, fans, cables, antennas, and power adapters. Hosting devices that can benefit from the adjustable connector include, but are not limited to, desktop

computers, notebook computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), cellular telephones, digital cameras or camcorders etc. Accordingly, it is the following claims and not the description of the above detailed embodiments which are intended to define the scope of the invention.

5